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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: ETHIOPIA: OPPOSITION WEIGHS ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES

REF: A. ADDIS 2624
[1](#)B. ADDIS 2817

Classified By: CDA Tuli Mushingi for Reasons 1.4 b and d.

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) Visiting DAS Wycoff discussed in separate November 19 meetings with prominent Ethiopian opposition leaders their strategies for engagement in the 2010 national elections. Bulcha Demeksa of the "Forum" opposition coalition expressed deep resentment towards the ruling EPRDF for what he called years of harassment and intimidation. He conveyed willingness to engage with the ruling party but only on a bilateral basis, which the EPRDF has refused. Hailu Shawel, Chairman of opposition All Ethiopia Unity Party (AEUP), considered engagement with the ruling party necessary to furthering democracy, and felt it could lead to a "win-win situation." Wycoff stressed that the U.S. is committed to working with all partners to promote a free and fair election process and to promoting good governance and democratization in Ethiopia. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (SBU) Deputy Assistant Secretary for African Affairs Karl Wycoff -- accompanied by Charge d'Affaires Roger Meece, Deputy Pol/Econ Counselor, and Poloff -- held separate meetings November 19 with Bulcha Demeksa, Chairman of opposition Oromo Federalist Democratic Movement and Vice Chairman of the Forum for Democratic Dialogue (Forum) Foreign Relations Committee, and with Hailu Shawel, Chairman of opposition All Ethiopia Unity Party (AEUP) and Deputy Chairman Yaicob Likke.

Forum Not In A Hurry To Engage, But Wants U.S. To

[1](#)3. (C) Bulcha said the Forum is eager to engage with the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), and is waiting for the EPRDF to call for bilateral discussions. (Note: The Forum has requested bilateral talks, but the EPRDF continues to insist that the Forum join multiparty talks. End Note.) Bulcha further noted that the Forum is encouraging supporters to participate in the election and that "only the most damaging circumstances will prevent participation." He did not identify those potentially disqualifying circumstances. Wycoff reiterated U.S. commitment to work with all parties to create an electoral environment conducive to a free and fair vote, including advocating with the ruling party and the government that they must create an environment that is conducive to

participation by all opposition parties.

¶4. (C) Regarding the Forum's refusal to engage in recent Code of Conduct (CoC) talks (reftel), Bulcha said the CoC is not a controversial document and the Forum does not have a problem with it. Rather, the Forum walked out of the CoC talks because the EPRDF refused to participate in bilateral talks to discuss the Forum's allegations of a narrowing of political space, harassment of supporters and candidates, and a host of other issues. The Forum refused to engage in multiparty talks because it feels that the opposition parties who would be present at multiparty talks are aligned with the ruling party, and therefore the Forum would be outnumbered. (Note: AEUP's Hailu Shawel later said that almost all of the issues that the Forum insisted on raising bilaterally were discussed at the multilateral CoC talks. End Note.)

¶5. (C) Bulcha expressed hope that the U.S. would insist that the GoE apply democratic principles and create a fair playing field for the upcoming elections. He felt that the U.S. had not "put down its foot" to encourage the GoE to respect human rights, despite the huge amounts of humanitarian assistance that the U.S. provides. He called the current government an absolute dictatorship, and insisted that the GoE lies to U.S. interlocutors about its commitment to democracy.

AEUP Sees Engagement As Opportunity

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¶6. (C) Hailu Shawel, Chairman of the AEUP (one of the four parties that negotiated the CoC), welcomed the EPRDF's willingness to engage opposition parties in the electoral process. However, on the CoC, Hailu said "until the papers are tested, we don't know if what we signed is worth anything." Hailu insisted that the only way to build a democracy is to engage with all political parties, and that through discussion a "win-win situation" will arise. (Comment: Since Hailu Shawel shook Prime Minister Meles' hand last month (reftel) following the signing of the CoC preamble, he has lost popularity among his supporters who feel that he sold out to the ruling party. End Comment.)

¶7. (C) Hailu described some of the major policy differences between the AEUP and the EPRDF, with AEUP favoring private land ownership and the abolition of ethnic federalism. Hailu said his party opted not to join the Forum because AEUP does not endorse ethnic-based parties. He feels that the Forum will disintegrate soon after the elections because its component parties are fundamentally different. AEUP Vice-Chair Yaicob Liike added that he feels the Forum is disjointed and unable to speak with one voice.

¶8. (C) Asked why AEUP chose to engage with the EPRDF at this time despite a turbulent past between the parties, Yaicob said that after 18 years of single-party rule, the ruling party realizes it needs to be more inclusive or its downfall is imminent. According to Yaicob, the EPRDF has taken some steps to help foster an electoral environment conducive to a free and fair vote. As an example of such a step, Yaicob cited the detention last month of an AEUP executive council member in the SNNP region. Yaicob said Hailu raised the issue with Minister of Communication Bereket Simon and within an hour the AEUP official was released.

¶9. (C) Asked whether they shared concerns of other opposition parties that the ruling party would use opposition engagement in the electoral process as a way to glibly legitimize the

elections, Hailu replied that engagement is the only option for establishing a democracy. Hailu expressed hope that the Forum would also engage, as he thought that would strengthen the process. Closing with a plea for as many international election observers as possible, Yaicob pointed out that there will be 43,000 polling centers for the 2010 elections. Throughout the conversations, we stressed that the U.S. is committed to working with all partners to promote a free and fair election process and to promoting good governance and democratization in Ethiopia.

COMMENT

¶10. (C) Bulcha and Hailu's contrasting viewpoints towards engagement in the electoral process highlight the differing mindsets of Ethiopian opposition parties: one camp harbors great resentment towards the ruling party and is hesitant to engage in the electoral process for fear of being used to legitimize unfair elections; the other camp deems that engagement with the ruling party is the only option to furthering democracy. Although the Forum has legitimate grievances, including five years of harassment, intimidation, and imprisonment of supporters, its disengagement in the electoral process leaves it with little opportunity to take advantage of the small amount of available political space. On the other hand, parties that chose to engage with the ruling party, such as AEUP, are widely considered by their constituencies to be "sell outs" and have lost support. With six months remaining before the elections, neither opposition camp seems poised to seriously contest this election. End Comment.

¶11. (SBU) DAS Wycoff cleared this message.
MUSHINGI